

Dear Committee member:

I had hoped to be in Helena today to talk to you directly, but a medical problem has intervened. However, I want to state my strong opposition to SB 478.

I am an 82 year old retired physician, living on the ranch property near Kalispell which my grandfather homesteaded in 1885. Actually, my wife and I did not inherit this property, but rather we spent 15 years buying out the interests of my mother and sister in order to be certain this place could be kept intact. Our ranch, now a family partnership, consists of almost 700 acres, 280 being farmland and the remainder being a riparian bottomland of timber and wetlands. A mile of the Flathead River runs through it. My father and mother worked hard over many years to accumulate this property. It has been recognized as a wildlife sanctuary for 50 years. It is a very special place. The market value of this property increased so dramatically that estate taxes threatened continued family ownership and stewardship. Primarily for this reason my wife, son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter decided to donate our development rights in a conservation easement to the Flathead Land Trust. Our kids were willing to give up a big share of their inheritance in order to save this land for future generations. Of course SB 478 would abolish this option for landowners.

I can understand people's discomfort with perpetuity, but that is what federal law requires for tax benefits. The alternative is to lose an important means of saving some of our natural heritage. I have been a conservative all my life. (As a kid I recall getting into a snowball fight with some FDR supporters; I don't remember how the fight turned out, but FDR won in a landslide.) I am concerned about conserving our individual rights, but I also believe we need to conserve our environment and natural values here in Montana. It saddens me to see our beautiful Flathead valley turning into a city, the farms being subdivided, and the clean waters being threatened. I know many people share my concern. We received an outpouring of favorable public responses to news of our conservation easement. Last fall Montana State University presented their Blue and Gold Award, their most prestigious award, to me and my wife, in part as recognition of our conservation easement.

I hope this personal story is not inappropriate. I assume you already know all the talking points against SB 478.

Thank you, Glenn L. Johnston, M.D.